

## **Knowledge Sharing within Organizations: Linking Art, Theory, Scenarios and Professional Experience**

Yvette C. Burton, Ph.D.

IBM Institute for Knowledge Management

and

Teresa Bailey

Jet Propulsion Laboratory, California Institute of Technology

In this presentation, Burton and Bailey discuss the challenges and opportunities in developing knowledge sharing systems in organizations. Bailey provides a tool using imagery and collage for identifying and utilizing the diverse values and beliefs of individuals and groups. Burton reveals findings from a business research study that examines how social construction influences knowledge sharing among task oriented groups.

### **Art and Theory**

Paradigms are socially constructed realities. In large organizations, there often are a number of paradigms operating simultaneously —each with its own unique set of values and beliefs. Additionally, different paradigms have different definitions of what knowledge is and different notions of how knowledge is shared. Because leaders and designers of knowledge sharing systems often make incorrect assumptions about values and beliefs, the voices of individuals and groups are excluded from the development phase.

There have been many efforts to find ways to include multiple voices. For example, in *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis*, Burrell and Morgan present a model with four paradigms for understanding organizations from a social perspective. This model is a possible starting point for identifying and recognizing the assumptions inherent within existing paradigms —assumptions about social phenomena such as status quo, conflict, free will and change, to name a few. Once identified, looking at the assumptions through a postmodern lens reveals the differences of one paradigm from another. In a multiple paradigmatic environment the differences reveal the multiple voices and rich complexity of the organization. Recognizing and utilizing this diversity creates greater potential for building successful knowledge sharing systems. Bailey builds on this concept by using imagery and collage to reveal the values and beliefs within paradigms to help decision-makers build inclusive knowledge sharing systems in their organizations.

### **Theory, Scenarios and Professional Experience**

The business relevance of socially constructed environments and paradigms are thought to be critical to successful knowledge sharing environments (Prusack, 1997). However, most knowledge sharing efforts fall short of optimal performance. Explicit business knowledge is knowledge that has been articulated or captured in a manner that allows others to share, transfer, and diffuse knowledge. Business related knowledge is assumed to be embedded in the organization, people, structures, and processes. The business challenges to existing approaches to KM, is how to create an environment or culture that fosters information sharing and knowledge exchange? What aspects of the organizational environment can be structured to

support these dynamics?

In this session, Burton sheds light on this issue. The purpose of this research is to gain greater understanding of the significance of socially constructed environments on employee knowledge sharing and business information exchange towards group task-goal completion.

The research setting is a large group facilitation environment, supported by knowledge workers of diverse skills and technology enabled resources. Participants were selected by the new system's senior leadership team. These employees were diverse and new to the idea of sharing or leveraging knowledge for organizational success. The unit of analysis for this study was small adhoc work groups engaged in task completion activities during a knowledge based and technology enabled decision-making event. Data from a narrative analysis of transcripts and observational analysis of video-tapes were used to examine how the environment was socially and cognitively structured to encourage business information and knowledge sharing.

From a goal-means orientation, emerging themes were captured through description tools designed to compare and contrast observed behaviors and patterns to key assumptions in the literature on group dynamics and knowledge exchange. Significant findings include: Disruptions in the flow of intra-group information and knowledge exchanges, can reveal the nature of gap(s) between current group cognitive structure (development stage) and the groups developmental needs for effective group sharing interventions.